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ABSTRACT

A survey of 105 rural school superintendents in Colorado investigated areas significant to success in and satisfaction with the superintendency in rural school districts. These areas included school district background, perceptions of the rural superintendency, future plans of respondents, governance issues, board-superintendent relations, external support, personal management issues, policy issues, and financial support. The average age of respondents was 51; 84 percent were male; the average experience as a superintendent was 9.3 years; and the average number of superintendent positions held was 1.6. Half the school districts served fewer than 744 students. Forty-one percent of students in the school districts received free or reduced-price lunch. Results indicate that respondents were highly satisfied with their jobs, but were less satisfied with their compensation package; expressed satisfaction with the level of decision-making authority available to them; and indicated good support for public education from parents, the community, and local media. However, one-third of respondents indicated that they were considering a career change in the next 3 years. When asked about boards of education, 76 percent of respondents were highly satisfied with their relationship with the board, and 86 percent were highly satisfied with the collaborative effort between the board and the superintendent. The majority of respondents expressed concern about the shrinking number of applicants for vacant teaching positions, but were enthusiastic about the dedication and quality of school personnel. An overwhelming number expressed dissatisfaction with the state charter school law. Respondents were also dissatisfied with the interdistrict choice program and the amount of time spent on mandatory testing. (LP)

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The Rural School District Superintendency:

A Colorado Perspective

National Rural Education Association
Annual Conference

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Introduction

This paper is a report of a subset of data related to rural school district superintendents taken from the results of a survey of Colorado school superintendents conducted as part of a study of the superintendency in the state. The study was developed and supported as a cooperative effort among the Colorado Association of School Executives (CASE), the Colorado Association of Superintendents and Senior Administrators (CASSA), and the Educational Leadership Program in the School of Education at the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs (UCCS).

This paper investigates the ten broad areas of the study which are considered significant to success in and satisfaction with the superintendency in rural school districts. Basic demographic and descriptive information about the rural school districts lead by the responding superintendents is also reported in an effort to develop a context for the findings of the study. The ten areas of study are categorized as: (1) a profile of Colorado rural school superintendents; (2) school district background; (3) perceptions of the rural superintendency; (4) future plans of responding superintendents; (5) governance issues; (6) board superintendent relations; (7) external support; (8) personnel management issues; (9) policy issues and education reform; and, (10) resources and financial support.

Methodology

The study was conducted using a survey research method. The self-administered questionnaire was developed with extensive input from school district superintendents. For example, the proposed framework and objectives of the study were the subjects of a

presentation at the Annual Conference of the Colorado Association of School Executives in the summer of 1998. A session of the meeting, convened for superintendents under the auspices of the Colorado Association of Superintendents and Senior Administrators was devoted to a review of the proposed study and the solicitation of suggestions for structure and content. Written, verbal and electronic communications were received following the session and were incorporated into the study.

Additionally, the executive board of CASSA and the Executive Director of CASE served as an advisory committee to the study. They were helpful in designing the framework for the study, refining the questionnaire and developing strategies for a good response rate from superintendents. The advisory committee brought a statewide perspective to the development of the study as they represented both state level education leaders and regional points of view.

All 176 Colorado school district superintendents were sent a cover letter signed by George Straface, President of CASSA and Steve Pratt, Executive Director of CASE, which encouraged a quick response. The solicitation package included a survey form and a return envelope addressed to the Office of Institutional Research at UCCS. One hundred and forty-five surveys were returned, which translates to an excellent return rate of 82%. One hundred and five of the 145 superintendents who responded to the survey identified themselves as serving in rural school districts. These 105 responses are the basis of this report. There was only one mailing of the questionnaire. No coding was used to identify the superintendents who did not return the survey form, therefore, no direct follow-up contacts were made to superintendents who did not reply. The process was designed to preserve the anonymity of the responder.

The survey consisted of 63 items which were divided among open ended, short answer and forced choice questions. Thirty-nine questions on the survey asked the superintendents to express their satisfaction with a host of issues and their perceptions as school leaders. These questions used a scaled response that ranged from 1 (very dissatisfied) to 6 (very satisfied).

Each superintendent received the same questionnaire. Data from the questionnaire forms were collected and tallied using the Microsoft Excel program. The Office of Institutional Research of the University of Colorado at Colorado Springs completed this phase of the study. The authors used the Statistical Package for the Social Science (SPSS) for further data analysis.

Findings

A profile of rural Colorado school superintendents

The average age of superintendents in the study was 51. The gender distribution was 84% male (88) and 16% female (17). Eight percent of the superintendents indicated they had a non-traditional path to the superintendency. This meant they had not ascended the usual career ladder of teacher, principal and central office administrator prior to assuming the superintendent position. All the superintendents had advanced degrees: 51% Masters, 19% Educational Specialist, 30% PhD.

The average number of years of experience as a superintendent was 9.3 for the group of which 4.5 years was in their current superintendent position. The mean number of superintendent jobs held by the responders was 1.6. Ninety-seven percent

had written contracts with an average term of 2 years. A rolling contract, i.e., a one year extension is added for each successful year on the job, was a provision found in 51% of the employment contracts. Other contract features indicated by the superintendents were: Performance goals not related to student academic achievement, 34%; Buy Out Provisions, 19%; Performance goals related to student academic achievement, 19%; Nondisclosure clause upon termination for reasons other than cause, 9%; Financial incentives tied to student academic achievement, 0%. When asked if they objected to any of the above listed contract provisions, 24% of the group objected to the idea of including financial incentives for student academic achievement in a superintendent's contract.

School district background

Responders were asked to identify characteristics about their rural school districts' and here is what they reported. During the past ten years, the 105 rural Colorado school districts had an average of 3 superintendents serving in that lead position. This statistic proved to be telling, as it correlated negatively with several aspects of board and superintendent interaction. Analysis of this interaction is given in subsequent sections below.

The total enrollment in these school districts was 77,477 students. The mean district size was 738 students, with half the districts serving fewer than 744 students. Forty-one percent of the children in these rural school districts received a free or reduced priced lunch. Predictably, the percentage of students in poverty in a school district was negatively correlated with many issues raised on the survey. This item is

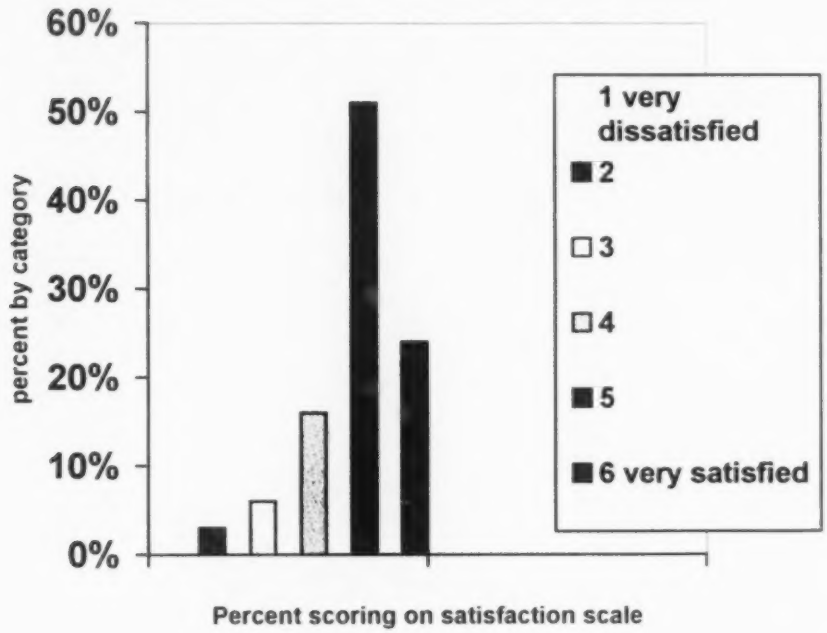
addressed in a separate section of this paper. As a general measure of student academic achievement, the superintendents reported that 59% of their fourth graders scored Proficient or better on the reading portion of the Colorado Student Assessment Program in 1998.

Perceptions of the rural superintendency

Based upon the data the superintendents appeared to be very satisfied with their jobs. Seventy-five percent rated their satisfaction with the job as a five or six (mean score 4.8) on the six-point satisfaction scale; none rated the job a one, indicating very dissatisfied. They were slightly less happy with their compensation package (4.1), only nine percent gave that question a score of six.

The superintendents were asked several questions about the impact of the job on their personal lives. There was about an even split, median score 3 and mean score 3.4, in response to the question about how the job affects the superintendent's family life. This compared to a score of 4.0 on the six-point satisfaction scale regarding the amount of time devoted to the job. A score of 3.6, with 56% of the responders scoring the item a 4, 5 or 6, was rendered regarding the question about the amount of job stress in the superintendency compared to other leadership/executive positions.

Chart 1 - Satisfaction with superintendent position



Superintendents expressed high satisfaction when asked about the areas of autonomy for decision making (4.6) and similarly (4.7) regarding the level of decision-making authority available to them in the job. However, in school districts with high turnover in the superintendency there was a negative relationship for these items, i.e., higher turnover related to lower satisfaction levels by responding superintendents.

Overall, superintendents indicated they have a fairly good support system for personal and professional needs. For example, a score of 4.7 was reached on the satisfaction scale regarding the professional support they receive from colleagues. When asked about their ability to seek personal support, they scored a 4.3, with 59%

rating this item a five or six. The superintendents also feel they have good support to help them stay professionally current. The average score here was 4.6 with 50% rating this item high on the scale.

Future plans of rural superintendents

The surveyed group was asked a series of questions about contemplated career moves and retirement. Almost one-third of the superintendents (31%) answered "yes" when asked if they were considering a career change in the next three years to a field outside of K-12 education. Yet, only 18% indicated they were considering a move down to an administrator post other than a superintendency in the next three years. The average Colorado superintendent expects to retire within the next seven years; with about half the school leaders saying they would retire within five years. Note that these percentages are duplicative and not cumulative, therefore the superintendents were responding to each question and not selecting among the most applicable to their future plans.

Governance issues in rural school districts

Survey responders where somewhat satisfied (mean 3.7) with the quality of candidates for school board positions. This response item rendered a near perfect bell shape distribution along the six point scale. But, they were slightly more enthusiastic (4.0) about how well their board members were preparing for meetings. They also felt (4.1) board members had satisfactory opportunities for training.

There was a higher level of satisfaction regarding the number of board meetings per month, as evidenced by 73% of the superintendents rating this question a five or six, mean score 4.8, on the six point scale. Similarly, satisfaction was almost as high (4.6) for the length of board meetings. The exceptions to these trends were found in districts with greater superintendent turnover, i.e., higher turnover in the superintendent's chair was negatively related to satisfaction with the number of board meetings per month and positively related to amount of time for board meetings (more and longer meetings).

The group reported that the average length of board meetings was 2.9 hours per meeting, with about half the responders averaging more than three hours. Reported average meeting times ranged from one to seven hours.

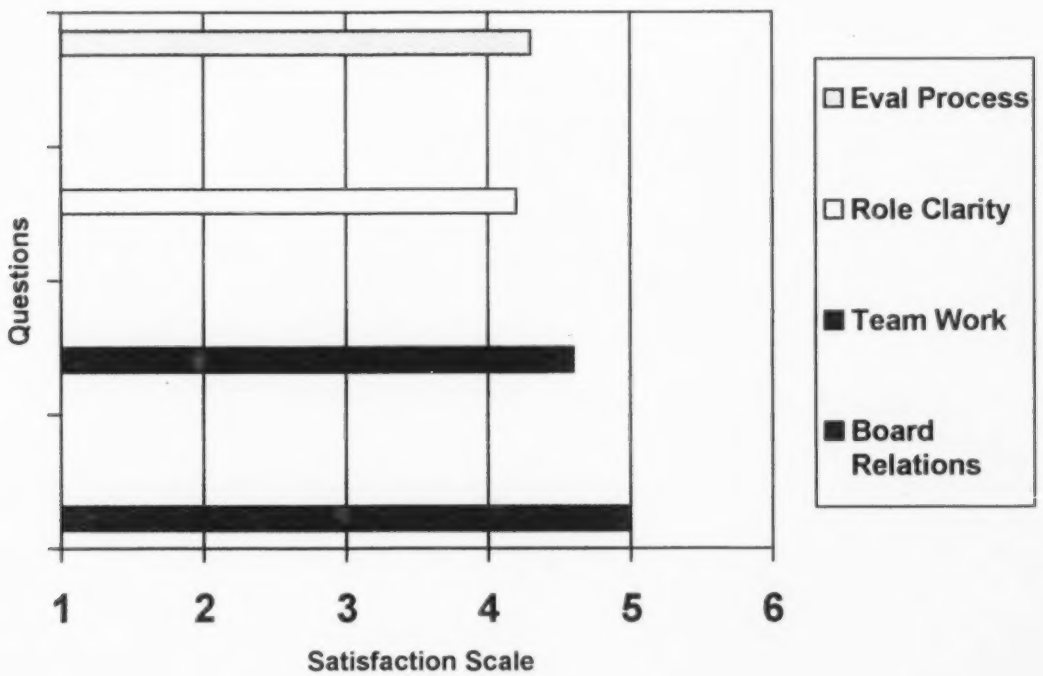
Board superintendent relations

Over 76% of the superintendents expressed high satisfaction when asked about their relationships with their boards. This item was scored high among the superintendents, average score (4.8). No one in the group rated this item a 1. A score of 4.3 was reached for the item related to the evaluation process used by the board to assess the superintendent's performance. Here, 55% of the superintendents indicated high satisfaction. A score of 4.2 was given to the question about role clarity between board and superintendent. Eighty-six percent of the superintendents reported high satisfaction (4.6) with the collaborative spirit or sense of teaming between the board and superintendent in their district. As a group, the superintendents spend almost

one-fifth (18.3%) of their time taking care of board member requests or working with board members.

These items on the survey correlated well and inter-related with other sections of the questionnaire. For example, in school districts with high superintendent turnover satisfaction with the length of board meetings was negatively correlated. Conversely, superintendents who reported good board relations were pleased with other aspects of the job and their board. Positive relationships are seen with: board member preparation for meetings; role clarity between board and superintendent; autonomy to make decisions; level of decision making; and, sense of team spirit between board and superintendent.

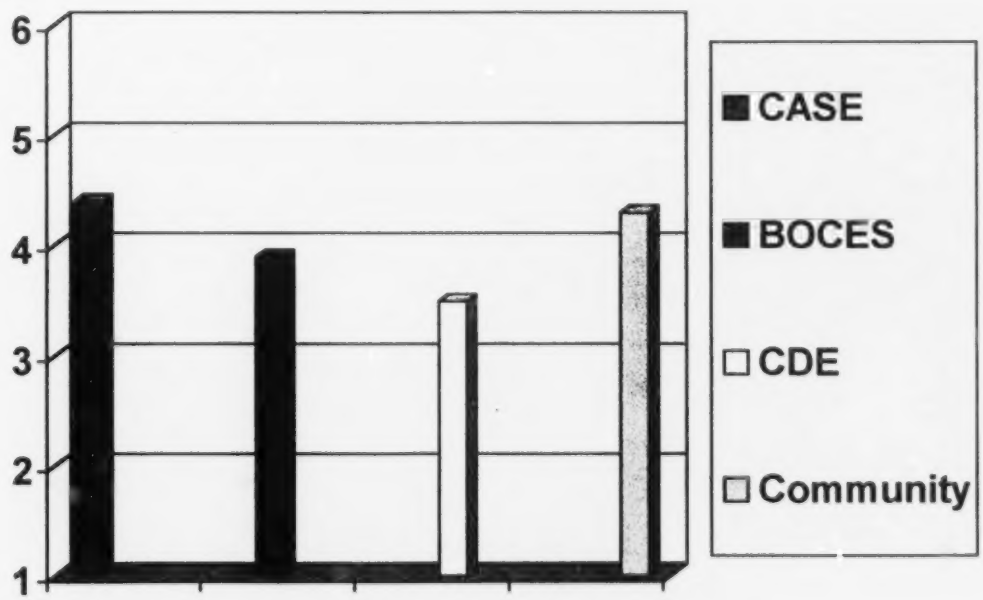
Chart 2 - Board Superintendent Relations



External Support

Several inquiries were made of the rural superintendents regarding the support systems available to help them with their management responsibilities. Eighty-six percent of the superintendents scored a four or higher (mean 4.5) when asked how satisfied they are with the quality of support from the Colorado Association of School Executives. About three-fourths of the superintendents reported good support from their communities, average score 4.3. Those districts served by a Board of Cooperative Educational Services organization (about 99% of the respondents) indicated the quality of satisfaction with support from this source as 4.0. The Colorado Department of Education rated a score of 3.8, with 63% of the superintendents expressing a high level (four or better) of satisfaction with the quality of support from this agency.

Chart 3 - External Support



The superintendents felt satisfied (4.2) that the local media fairly portrayed their schools in news stories. However, with a score that ranked at the bottom of all questions on the survey (2.2), the respondents stated their dissatisfaction with how the national media portray the public schools.

Personnel management issues in rural school districts

This section of the survey questioned the superintendents about perceived current trends regarding strategic personnel issues. The rural superintendents for the most part are not satisfied (average score 2.8) with the number of applicants for teaching vacancies in their districts. Almost 46% rated this item a two or less. Yet, the quality of new hires for teaching positions rated a 3.7 with 25% of the superintendents expressing high satisfaction by scoring it a five or six. Here again, when the rate of poverty in the school district is considered, the data take a dramatic turn. The question about the number of applicants for teacher vacancies in poor districts correlated negatively, -.232, as did the quality of new hires -.318, both at the .05 level or better of significance.

Superintendents were very pleased with the overall quality of their present administrative staff and the average score for this item was a 4.7 with three-quarters of the responders indicating very high satisfaction on the survey. However, a slightly different picture emerged regarding the quality of applicants for vacant positions in the administrator ranks. Rural superintendents are struggling to fill vacant high school principal positions. The group expressed high dissatisfaction (34%) with the quality of candidates for these jobs. Table 1 displays the responses about how satisfied rural school

district superintendents are with the quality of applicants for vacant administration positions.

Vacant Position	Central Office	Elementary Principal	Middle School School	High School Principal
Mean Score	3.6	3.7	3.3	3.2
Median Score	4.0	4.0	3.0	3.0

Table 1 Satisfaction With Quality of Candidates for Administrator Vacancies

State policy issues and education reform

The rural superintendents had some strong opinions about several extant Colorado education reform policy issues. The area of Charter Schools garnered a very low level of satisfaction. An overwhelming number rated the state policy on Charter Schools negatively, scoring it a 2.5. In contrast, the Inter-District Choice policy scored a 3.8. The Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP) scored a 3.1 on the six-point scale, with most scores clustering around the two to four range. And, when asked about the amount of time devoted to mandatory testing of students, the superintendents also expressed dissatisfaction with a score of 2.9 or about 64% rating this item a three or less. It appears superintendents in school districts with higher concentrations of poor children were even less supportive of these policy issues. A negative correlation was seen (-.331,

-.238) regarding the state testing program and academic standards. A number of superintendents voiced these concerns in the comment section of the survey as well.

Resources and Financial Support

Rural Colorado superintendents have mixed feelings about the financial resources available to operate their school districts. This question scored a 3.2, with 37% circling a one or two and 24% circling a five or six on the six-point satisfaction scale. However, only three percent (3%) gave this item a score of six to designate they were very satisfied with the money available for school operations.

The survey also inquired about school district space and physical plant needs. The response to the question about the condition of school facilities in the responding rural superintendent's school district distributed relatively evenly across the six-point scale, average 3.4. But the superintendents were slightly less sanguine about their ability to meet physical plant needs, 3.0, with 38% scoring this item a one or two. Not surprisingly, these items were also negatively related to the percent of children receiving free or reduced lunch in the district, i.e., condition of schools, -.153 and ability to meet physical plant needs, -.199 at the .01 level.

Superintendents were eager to comment about resources. The message about adequate and equitable financial resources came across clearly in the comments section of the questionnaire.

Challenges and Assets

The superintendents in the study were asked to comment on what they believe to be the biggest challenges facing the public education system in Colorado and to list the three greatest assets of the system. This inquiry rendered a rich set of responses from the chief executives. Their answers were tabulated and grouped by category. Below is a summary of the input received for these two open response questions.

Challenges facing public education in Colorado

- The need for financial resources was the answer overwhelmingly given to the question about the three greatest challenges facing public education in Colorado. This category of response far outstripped all other items mentioned for this question. Responses here included items related to insufficient resources for general operating expenses, concerns about the equitable distribution of funds, resources for technology, money for school reform, adequate revenue to help students meet the new academic standards, trepidation about retaining and attracting quality personnel and concerns about meeting the repair and construction of school buildings. Lack of money came across loud and clear as the big issue with the superintendents.
- A second area of challenge identified by the group is categorized as the image of public education. Here the respondents raised issues about trust, confidence in the schools, negative media coverage and the need for improved public relations.

- The next most frequently mentioned areas of concern are grouped under the heading of accountability. The superintendents expressed the need to deal with issues related to the state testing program (the Colorado State Assessment Program), the need to meet the new accreditation standards and the concern about how to raise student achievement to the new higher academic standards established by the state of Colorado.

Assets of public education in Colorado

This section of the survey produced a clear yet less rich response. While the question about challenges facing the system rendered four themes or messages, this section formulated only two overarching answers and several smaller groupings.

- The superintendents believe they are fortunate to have the quality of personnel they have working in the schools. This area of response was the category that received a tremendous number of comments. Terms like: high quality staff; dedicated professionals; strong teachers; excellent administrators; incredible educators; and, outstanding teachers still in the classroom; were frequently used.
- A distant second among the assets of public education singled out by the questionnaire respondents was the category of local control. This marks an interesting contrast to items related to challenges facing the system outlined above, where the superintendents noted their concern about state-level meddling. Regardless, local autonomy was seen as an asset of the system.

- No clear theme emerged as the third recognized asset of the public schools. Instead, what is seen is a cluster of smaller categories of strengths. Among the items listed were support from parents and the community; quality students; the concept of free universal education; and, equal educational opportunity.

Summary and Conclusions

Rural school superintendents in Colorado have mixed concerns about the level of resources available to their school districts to meet the challenges of new academic standards, to address demands for school facilities and to attract and retain high quality personnel. The survey was conducted early in 1999 and 105 of the state's rural school leaders responded.

The chief executives are for the most part satisfied with their jobs and feel good about the working relationship with their school boards. Yet, almost 18% indicated they are contemplating a career change in the next three years. With an average age of 51, the typical Colorado school superintendent expects to retire in about seven years. The superintendents reported that over the past ten years there were three superintendents serving in the lead role in their school district. Rural school superintendents in Colorado have an average of 9.3 years of experience in the top job.

The rural school superintendents are somewhat satisfied with the quality of candidates for school board positions, but more enthusiastic about how well their current board members prepare for meetings and the training opportunities available to their elected school board members. The typical school board meeting runs about three hours

and satisfaction was fairly high regarding the number of meetings taking place. However, these items were negatively correlated with high turnover in the superintendent position.

Support for public education is perceived as mixed by the group as they indicated good support from parents, their community and the local media, but they feel the national media portrays public education in an unfair negative light.

An increasing number of superintendents are apprehensive about the shrinking number of applicants for vacant teaching positions, yet they are very enthusiastic about the dedication and quality of their school personnel. This issue was particularly problematic for school districts with high concentrations of poor children. Although the group is pleased with the talent they have currently in administrative positions they are anxious about the quality of candidates for vacant leadership slots, particularly when asked about vacant high school principal jobs.

An overwhelming number of rural superintendents are dissatisfied with the state charter school law, but less so with the inter-district choice program. Similarly, the group is very troubled by the amount of time students are devoting to mandatory testing.

Overall, Colorado rural school superintendents are worried about the image of public education and the perceived lack of confidence in the system. Paradoxically, the group sees the quality and dedication of school staff as a genuine asset of the rural public schools in Colorado, and view local control as a real strength of public education.

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